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AUTHOR Isserlis, Janet
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ABSTRACT

Experiences with family and intergenerational programs in English Second Language (ESL) literacy are reviewed, and factors that contribute to their success are discussed. It is suggested that as the notion of literacy expands, conceptual boundaries of the population of learners must expand also. While there is much to be learned from existing program models and procedures, each program must be linked to its own setting and learners. Intergenerational learning necessitates collaboration across formerly separate domains. Practitioners are urged to study a variety of programs and determine the need for adaptation or reworking to transfer to another setting, examining options thoroughly and choosing carefully and with an eye to the best use of available resources. Proactive rather than reactive program planning is emphasized. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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ESL Literacy: What's Working, Why and How: Family Literacy

Janet Isserlis

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I am not a family literacy practitioner. To the extent that I work with ESL literacy learners at a housing project and their children, toddlers and infants are often present, and to the extent that I give them children's books to read and eat and play with and to the extent that I invite the learners to consider if they'd like to read to their children during class -- to all those extents, I suppose it could be argued that I do participate in family literacy. To the extent that I speak to students' children who call in to report an absence for their parents, and to the extent that I correct learner-generated stories that leave school so that learners' children won't ridicule their minor mistakes, it could be said that I participate in intergenerational learning. Providence College students brought toys to the kids whose mothers study at the housing project and spent the morning playing with them, and interacting with their mothers. Other university students from ESL methodology and ethnography courses observe my other class held on site at the Institute. Are we participating in interscholastic learning? Is this, too, cross-generational?

I'm not making light of these events or perspectives. These considerations are valid, and yet does this mean that we as literacy workers are doing anything differently now than we've done all along? A closer look look at our particular settings might reveal that in fact many programs, de facto, emerge from and are fed by community contexts. Is the fact that intergenerational and family (or workplace or computer-assisted) literacy instruction are all currently hot commodities in the funders' market influencing our decisions in calling what it is we do one thing or maybe calling it another thing altogether?

As I read through the existing literature, and program reports, I find that many others are in the process of examining reports of existing programs, noting promising trends, posing critical questions. This isn't a particularly novel way of proceeding -- but as I continue to consider programs and policies springing up nationwide and internationally, I find

that this may be a necessary process for us all. Without reinventing the wheel, we do need to develop local assessment and implementation strategies. We can learn from existing program models and procedures, but no program can be taken whole cloth, complete and ready to assemble. We need to examine programs from the perspective of our own settings and learners. The purpose of this paper is to examine existing initiatives around family literacy and to consider what we do mean when we speak of intergenerational or family literacies, and finally, and most importantly to pose critical questions about the agenda set forth within the parameters of the family literacy movement.

Government's interest and involvement in family literacy programs may well be tied to economic self-sufficiency, a trend that is not entirely unfamiliar to anyone who has worked with refugee language programming. The US Department of Education News, released in October of 1989, announced that new Even Start Awards would "fund projects linking early childhood education with adult education to help disadvantaged parents prepare and assist their children to succeed in school". The program will "also reinforce the learning experiences of the early school years". "To participate, parents must be eligible participants for the federal adult education programs".

Similarly, **New Partnerships**, a joint-agency publication explaining the parameters of the Family Support Act (FSA) of 1988 speaks in terms of "reaching beyond the purview of any one system"...in attacking the goal of "helping families avoid long-term dependence on public assistance" (p. 4). Indeed, the linkages between the FSA, Even Start and other public assistance work to earn programs will necessarily involve concerted effort on the parts of educators and social service providers across the board. Agencies pursuing these funds might carefully consider the possibility of a multiple agenda in deciding the ultimate value of such programs to refugee and immigrant participants.

The DOE release cites examples of three Even Start service models; in

rural Monticello, Utah, mobile learning laboratories, targeted for use by native American Indians; an urban plan in Lowell, Massachusetts which creates a family-oriented Shared Literacy center, and a Migrant Home Literacy Program in Albany, NY, to "give parents of three and four year old children the knowledge, motivation, skills and resources needed to help their children". On the basis of description alone, it is difficult to gauge the efficacy and value of such programs. Suzanne Griffin helped design and create a participatory and innovative Even Start program in Washington state. Don Ranard reports that in Griffin's program, "teachers begin each 10-week cycle with an assessment and analysis of learners' needs. At the same time there is a state-developed competency-based curriculum for teachers to "fall back on". (Ranard, 2).

Ultimately, national evaluation will "identify effective practices and strategies which combine adult education, parenting training, and early childhood education into a coordinated program of services". (DOE, p. 2) It is reasonable to assume that dissemination of such program information will follow sometime thereafter. (More on dissemination shortly).

Even Start/OBEMLA is not the only funder of family programs. The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, and private corporations, among others (nationally) have turned their sights towards family and intergenerational learning. For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to explicate the distinction between family and intergenerational learning. 'Family', per se, seems to be a guideline for some programs, which explicitly allow children and their parents to participate. In some instances, 'parent' may be equated with primary caregiver. In other cases where learners of different ages come together around literacy in some context, we might more appropriately speak of intergenerational learning. Of course these distinctions are not hard and fast. The very notion of family can be viewed as a cultural construct, and among many of our learners, family and community might be blurred distinctions. Hence throughout

this paper, I try to consider both 'family' and 'intergenerational' literacy activity as situated occurrences, and address existing programs where one or the other or both might dominate.

An overview of some well known programs includes far more programs for native speakers than those for refugees or immigrants. Ruth Nickse examines whether parents and/or children may be direct beneficiaries of instruction. Her taxonomy provides a useful framework for considering the extent to which existing programs wish to alter their own missions -- perhaps expanding their roles as providers of ESL to adults to explicitly create programs for children; or in other cases expanding awareness of ways in which adults interact with other learners cross-generationally, while still maintaining their original focus upon adult ESL literacy learning. In the BCEL newsletter of April, 1989, Nickse stresses the need for: literacy and parenting education for adults; literacy and pre-literacy activities for children; systematic parent/child interaction around literacy; emphasis on parents as teachers; interdisciplinary teamwork between ABE and early childhood educators; and liaison activity with community providers who interact with the populations targeted for such literacy programming. Although it could be argued that this is a prescriptive view of family literacy, and further argued that not all of this prescription might meet the needs of refugee and immigrant populations, Nickse does provide some sort of framework through which to build and consider programs that might work for multicultural populations.

It seems that most family literacy curricula include some aspect of parent and/or parenting issues, survival skills and school/cultural orientation, along with 'basic' English and ESL literacy. Clearly, the ways in which these component pieces are brought together and the methodologies through which this occurs vary from site to site.

Adult educators are familiar with the experience of adult classes filled not only with adult learners, but also with their children, or

their neighbors' children -- toddlers, newborns, kids out of school because they're sick, or missed the bus. Where we once found the presence of these young visitors distracting, but unavoidable, and tried to carry on around them, we now find ourselves looking at ways to embrace and include these young learners. Some programs, such as that of El Centro del Cardinal (part of the U Mass/OBEMLA Family Literacy Program) incorporated literacy-related play events within the classroom -- adults and children sharing a common space. Additionally, through a problem-posing participatory approach issues of learning were situated in a social context which included the family, the roles of parents and children, and the real life barriers to learning which affected participants at the programs' three sites.

In terms of hands-on material, the recently published Talking Shop: A curriculum sourcebook for participatory adult ESL (developed by the U Mass Family Literacy Project teachers) presents valuable and usable information for practitioners who look to incorporate some or all of the components of family literacy into their own programs. The U Mass demonstration project raises important questions about ways in which demonstration materials are amassed and disseminated -- what's in place 'out there' -- beyond the project itself, to help practitioners and administrators access those findings and materials?

The HELP curriculum (Home English Literacy for Parents: An ESL Family Literacy Curriculum.) developed by the Northwest Educational Cooperative lends itself to participatory and problem-posing approaches while providing a competency based format from which teachers might select topics for discussion. Sections on English survival and school related competencies allow for, and provide suggested generative questions towards exploring parent and parenting issues. My own bias is toward a mutually constructed curriculum, such as that described by Elsa Auerbach and many others, but just as we cannot impose an agenda upon learners, it is unfair to impose a learning/teaching model upon practitioners. I raise the issue of

methodology here because it is an important factor in the overall viewing, designing and implementation of family literacy programs.

Implicit in virtually all of the program descriptions I've read and people I've talked to is the assumption of a connection between school and home literacies. Reginald Clark makes (ctd. Literacy Beat 6/88, p. 5) the point that "families in the same neighborhood can be organized very differently, in ways not determined by race or class and not dependent on strong literacy skills of parents". I ask you to bear this mind as you reflect upon the range of program possibilities -- including parental involvement in the schools, native language literacy, joint immigrant/refugee and native population programs run through the public schools, community based efforts, etc.

Many programs invite parental involvement in the schools through at-home reading programs. Children read books, and their parents sign a form to that effect when each book is completed. Auerbach reports on the Chinle Navajo Parent-Child Reading Program, "another project designed to build home and school links . "Children share books with parents either by reading or telling the stories... and also write their own books based on Navajo stories" which they've heard from parents or grandparents. Parental involvement programs around a number of school-related issues are growing in number, and challenge assumptions about what Southeast Asian and other parents may or may not believe to be true about the schools and the role(s) of their childrens' teachers. In considering what works, we are well advised against the "deficit hypothesis" to which Auerbach and Clark (above) make reference. We cannot assume that parents lack the skills to promote school success in their children, nor that their exists a monolithic language minority household wherein nothing about school or literacy in the US in understood. Nor are schools the only venues in which parent/child literacy activity occurs.

Libraries in Providence are reaching out to refugee and immigrant

populations who had previously not sought their services. The California State Library's Families for Literacy Program provides funds so that local California Literacy Campaign programs can expand their services to the families of adult learners with preschool children.

In Vancouver, Indo-Canadian women are invited to participate in classes geared specifically to their socio-cultural situations and needs as young mothers and wives with workplace, childcare, and home-related demands placed upon them. In Britain, community workers visit parents of preschool age children with welcome packs in order to begin the school home connection at a very early age. Many of the new parents there (and elsewhere) are themselves very young people, for whom school is not necessarily a thing of the past.

The National Center for Family Literacy, established last July through a grant from the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, aims to "expand the efforts of the nation to break the cycle of low literacy that exists in many families"... and "focuses on the intergenerational transmission of literate behavior and seeks to maximize the strengths of the family as an institution in assisting its members to participate fully in a literate society". While some of us might have problems with the notion of 'breaking the cycle', and the assumptions implicit in that notion, we stand to learn a great deal about the way the funding winds blow through attentive listening to exactly that kind of language. One Kenan program, PACT, (Parent and Child Together) brings parents to the school where their preschool children study. There, parents study (ABE, GED,and vocations), meet about parenting issues, do volunteer work in the school setting and participate in literacy related activities with their children at the school. Additionally, program personnel provide training to other educators who wish to replicate the program at their own sites or schools.

Although the Kenan program is not a second language program, we are well advised to look at it. Quality ESL family literacy programs have

already run their grant cycles, and it is not clear how or if the direct service components of those programs will be continued. What might this tell us about the value of such learners and programs to funders, and how can we strengthen and create programs for non-native speakers at the local level, across the country, and around the world?

At the Genesis Preparatory School in Providence, a full array of ancillary services, including transportation, childcare and the provision of a midday meal supplement ESL classes for adults and an intergenerational learning program capitalizes on parents' proximity to their children at the same setting during the school day.

Gail Weinstein-Shr's involvement with and dissemination of the model of Project LEIF explicitly dealt with the social isolation experienced by older refugees. At last look, Gail, and her colleague Nora Lewis have monitored the evolution of LEIF with a critical bent toward understanding the implications of events and activities that have transpired during its first years. Those not familiar with LEIF (Learning English through Intergenerational Friendship) should know that it began with a gerontologist who was interested in intergenerational relations, and who had the good fortune to hire Gail to create a language-learning context through which to mitigate against the social isolation of elderly refugees, by matching them with college age tutors.

To a large extent, it seems the initial goals have been met. Older people are out of their homes, working with younger tutors. However, as learning logs were examined and tutors' and learners' voices began to be heard, several strands of issues emerged. These issues, (described at the International Reading Association's North American Conference on Adult and Adolescent Literacy by Weinstein-Shr, Lewis, and Don Ranard), surfaced and emerged as a result of reflection upon intergenerational theory and practice, and in many ways serve as hingepins around several important issues pertaining to literacy in its broadest contexts. Briefly, those concerns

center around issues of intergenerational conflict, consequences of literacy, significance of language in negotiating relationships in a new setting, and the notion of audience in considering generation of learners' writing, particularly oral histories which have served as problem-posing generative codes.

Among things to consider in contemplating the truths and fictions of family literacy, is an increase into ethnographic approaches and explorations of community uses and valuings of literacy. What are the connections between home and school literacies? What literate behaviors occur around and within learners' lives? Where do considerations of native language literacy and culture fit into programming for non-native speakers? To what extent are they participants in literacy activity? Two adult ESL students sit in a parking lot outside school, reading a Colombian newspaper. Another learner carries a birth announcement in her notebook. Someone else has a form for me to sign to verify her attendance for welfare reimbursement. Another learner, homebound with two small children, asks me, when I visit her, about an envelope with charges printed on it for use of telephone and TV during her stay in the maternity ward. All of this print activity impacts in various ways upon people's lives, and the quality of peoples' lives affects their learning. In considering the family as part and parcel of learners' lives, what changes do we make in our thinking of who learners are? Are we in fact changing the ways in which we view learners and programs, or are we becoming more explicit in our understandings of the complexities and richness of their lives and communities?

It is commendable that the notions of intergenerational and family literacies explicate the possibilities that a multiplicity of literacies exist, and that literacy is framed in a context beyond that of the book and the school. Many of us have worked away from the notion of developing discrete skills in and of themselves and toward realizing ways in which to strengthen learners' abilities within a contextualized social construct.

Reading and writing meaningful material provides the context through which various skills may be strengthened and developed, and that development continues and exists beyond the classroom walls. Surely the goal we all share has to do with facilitating the development of literate behavior among our learners and by extension through their communities.

Weinstein-Shr eloquently states that while good TESL practice holds that it is important to teach "language of immediate relevance for use, in fact very little is known about what kinds of language skills are really needed by (elders) or how language is used in immigrant/refugee households". (Weinstein-Shr, forthcoming). Auerbach indicates that existing (program) models "seemed not to be informed by ethnographic research or substantiated"...by what her teachers learned from the learners themselves. While I've been asked to talk about practices that work, it would be irresponsible to merely report on programs without pointing explicitly to the importance of and need for the careful ethnographic and collaborative work required to design programs that will truly meet learners' needs. Not only do we need to consider the community but also we need to examine the possible consequences of literacy acquisition for these learners. We can learn to recognize literate environments that already exist by visiting learners, seeing the print surrounding them, but also through recognizing the less obvious signs of literate activity in their lives. Ethnography provides one valuable tool for gaining such an understanding and recognition. Small scale action research, and explicit coinvestigation with learners might also reveal ways in which home and school literacies are or may not be [culturally] congruent. Families do use and are involved in literacy and literate behaviors. How can we negotiate the agenda of school-literacy transmission with that of facilitating transfer and addition of those literacies already in existence within learners' homes and communities?

Who drives to school but says they can't read? How do non-reading drivers organize the information they need to negotiate traffic, find their

kids' school, fill the gas tank, and get to work? What about the stresses that might occur as women gain literacy and may need to renegotiate their own roles within families -- as mothers and/or as wives? What about the conflict that already exists among families as role expectations have been severely changed and violated as young people function as transmitters of knowledge to their once more-knowledgeable elders? Harman and Edelsky speak powerfully to the issues of alienation and connection that accompany acquisition of literacy in its broadest sense.

Politicians and educators tend to stress the importance of early intervention programs. Sticht and McDonald point to the literacy rates of mothers as directly affecting those of their children, and these assertions are cited repeatedly in statements and rationales given in generic family literacy overviews and in programs' descriptive information. While statistics in fact bear out their assertions, literacy practitioners -- particularly those who work with immigrants and refugees -- cannot overlook the qualitative evidence couched within quantitative reports. Do parents who read have children who read? In the case of an elderly Cambodian widow, with little or no prior experience with literacy, can we ask if children who read might help parents to learn to know what reading is and what the impact of literacy acquisition may be?

In thinking of what works with family literacy, the broadening of these conceptual boundaries around who learners are is appropriate in conjunction with the expanding notions of literacy. The extent to which we actively recruit and include learners, and design programs around their needs across generations depends on a range of contingencies: mission, funding, population, pedagogical bent and approach, to cite a few. What does this mean? Are missions revised to incorporate funders' directions? Who sets the direction[s] in which the dollars flow? How prepared are we to meet the mandates of new funding trends and to what degree do we agree with the slant of those trends?

How do line teachers respond to and interact with parent involvement efforts? Like worksite education programs, a parent involvement scheme which does not take into account the role of key personnel in the school - most notably classroom teachers - is bound to meet resistance. We might look at our own networks and systems locally to find pockets of strength and interest, and shared concerns. Some of us work in school systems, in community based organizations, proprietary institutions; we're practitioners, administrators, coordinators, materials developers, researchers, and parents, ourselves. For each setting and for each person in that setting needs will be perceived differently. It seems that the concern for intergenerational learning necessitates a need for collaboration across formerly separate domains. This coming together can be logistically daunting, and for some downright aggravating. For others, this will be a time of gathering strength through cooperation in real ways, which precipitates serious investigation into our own real circumstances and networks.

It's all too easy to come away form a gathering such as this determined, possibly overwhelmed, maybe excited at some remote possibility for a change or expansion of program mission and design. What can we envision, what may be just beyond our singular point of view, how can working in concert with others perhaps enable all to further the goal of providing access to literacy to more second language learners? These are questions I ask you to ask yourself. There are any number of programs to study, perhaps call or visit; any of those programs will need adaptation, change, reworking for transfer to another setting. This is a critical time for funding for all of us. We must be mindful not to throw out the baby with the bath water. There may or may not be cause in your particular setting to significantly change the scope or mission of your programming to incorporate or add on a family program. For some family literacy may be an opportunity to add a program to an existing institution; for others such a program may save a school which has lost other funding; for yet others

the concepts and practice evolving out of ongoing programs may provide the impetus for expansion of existing programs in one direction or another. For yet others, the embracing of a socially constructed context, and the explicit learning about learners' environments -- including their families and communities -- might serve to enhance the scope of existing programs without significantly changing them, per se. It is my hope that we examine our options thoroughly and choose carefully.

We as a marginalized workforce have too often taken a reactive stance; this may be one point at which we can proactively decide our agenda, together with our learners, in order to meet their needs and the needs of those in their families and communities for literacy in the native tongue and/or in English.

Janet Isserlis/ IIRI/ 375 Broad Street/ Providence RI/ 02907/ USA/ (401) 831-1460

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for more information:

Home English Literacy for Parents: An ESL Family Literacy Curriculum
Northwest Educational Cooperative
1855 Mt. Prospect Road
Des Plaines, Illinois (708) 803-3535

University of Massachusetts Family Literacy Materials
Barbara Graceffa
UMass/Boston
Boston, Mass. 02125

In America
Center for Applied Linguistics
1118 22nd St. NW
Washington, DC 20037

Making the Nation Smarter
Penn State /College of Education
204 Calder Way, Suite 209
University Park, PA 16801 (814) 863-3777

Business Council for Effective Literacy Newsletter
1221 Avenue of the Americas - 35th Floor
New York, NY 10020 (212) 512-2415/2412

This is not an exhaustive listing, but provides a way into research into family/intergenerational literacy -- both within the mainstream as well as specifically around refugee and immigrant literacy and language learning.